

Gap changes butterflies stance

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A colony of rare butterflies at Fort Indiantown Gap could permanently halt much of the post's military training.

The butterflies could be placed on the federal endangered species list, which, butterfly advocates and Gap officials agree, would require measures to protect the insects that would severely limit tank-maneuver training at the Gap.

Now, Gap officials are asking to enter into an agreement that they hope will give them more latitude in deciding how the butterflies, known as Regal Fritillaries, and tanks will co-exist.

For three years, Carol Copeyon, an endangered-species specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at State College, and her fellow workers have tried to persuade Gap officials to enter into such a conservation agreement.

"At every meeting, it was 'No thank you,'" Copeyon said.

Then, on April 21, Gap officials changed their minds.

"We've had a change in leadership," said Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, Gap spokesman. State Adjutant General [William] Lynch believes it's important to work together. Teamwork is the way to do business and this includes assuring the future of the Regal Fritillaries at Fort Indiantown Gap."

The agreement lessens the likelihood that the butterfly will be placed on the endangered species list, but it's no guarantee. Groups could still petition the federal government for its placement.

"Listing a species as endangered is by nature more restrictive. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would have more regulatory control on the training at Indiantown Gap and the training in the corridor," Cleaver said. "No matter what path is taken, we will assure that there is sufficient habitat for the Regal on this installation."

The amount of acreage set aside as a habitat for the butterfly would determine the future of the Regal and Fort Indiantown Gap.

State National Guard officials who run the post now set aside 158 acres of the Gap's 19,200 acres for the **Regal Fritillary**. Copeyon said that is "not enough to ensure a viable population" of the butterflies. The amount set aside could ultimately reach 600 to 1,000 acres of land, she said.

"The acreage is a big question mark," Cleaver said. "Just how much acreage does the Regal need? Let good science determine the acreage."